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Sisters in law

Accomplished women are the rule, not the exception



Lillian E. Cowan
'27



Hon. Mary Ann
Killeen '52



Hon. Ann T.
Mikoll '54

In the beginning, men dominated the bench and bar. Only with the advent of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s did the Law School see more than a handful of women in any one class. But a look back over 125 years of innovative legal education shows that accomplished and pioneering women have been the rule, not the exception, at Buffalo's Law School.

That legacy began with the school's first two women graduates, both members of the Class of 1899 – **Helen Z.M. Rodgers** and **Cecil B. Wiener**.

Rodgers, daughter of a prominent New York City family, entered the Buffalo Law School shortly after marrying at age 20. "Fortunately," she said, "I have no housekeeping habits to overcome. I do not believe that a woman can take care of her house herself and work seriously at her profession. Therefore, I always hire experts to manage my home for me, and then apply myself to be an expert in law."

In addition to her private practice, Rodgers dabbled in politics and activism, among other issues pushing for women's right to sit on juries: "It would be a good thing – if only to protect the men. You know, if a young, pretty and flirtatious woman is concerned in a suit, the men often decide the case with little regard to justice."

And she was known as a tough adversary. John Lord O'Brian, former U.S. Attorney for the Buffalo district, once said he would rather try a case against almost any other lawyer in Buffalo than against Rodgers,



Cecil B. Wiener and Helen Z.M. Rodgers.

because she had beaten him before more juries than any other lawyer in the city.

Four years after her graduation, Wiener wrote in an article, "One can be a school-teacher, a clerk, a physician, an architect or something else, but to me, the law affords the greatest fascination. I think there is a great opportunity for a bright, independent woman in becoming a lawyer. One requires mental ability, but perseverance and constant study are certain to bring reward."

Wiener worked with fervor for women's suffrage. "As long as women aren't idiots or imbeciles, why shouldn't they vote and take part in

their governments?" she asked. At the same time, her views on the "modern girl" remained conservative: "I think the modern girl is all right. Her danger lies in her inclination to express herself, rather than acknowledging duty and obligation. If she is going to express herself, she must be sure first that she has something to express."

Her greatest success came to Wiener in 1932 when she was elected Erie County's first female judge.

Those pioneering women were followed by other notables, including **Madge T. Taggart '20**, the first female judge of the Buffalo City Court; **Marie T. Scalzo '24**, who was

only 25 years old when she was appointed a deputy attorney general in New York State's Fraud Prevention Bureau; **Winifred C. Stanley '33**, Erie County's first female district attorney and elected to Congress in 1942; and **Carol McCormick Smith '45**, the first female lawyer to serve on the United Nations legal staff and director of psychological warfare for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Still, only a handful of female faces dotted the Law School's classes – until 1971, when the entering class of 609 students included 63 women. That jump reflected both a minority recruitment program that drew in women as well as members of racial minorities, and the broader societal trend of the nascent feminist movement. Within a few years parity was well on its way; the Law School in 1975 counted 215 women among its 800 students.

Today women make up half or maybe even more of each entering class, and exercise leadership roles in all areas of student life.

About 43 percent of the school's full-time faculty members are women, and women hold important roles in the Law School staff and administration.

No sampling can do justice to the achievements of women through the Law School's long history. But no celebration of sisters in law would be complete without a mention of the following accomplished graduates:

Lillian E. Cowan '27 practiced law until four years before her death, at age 102, in 2010. One of three women in her class, she was the 45th woman to graduate from UB Law School, which has since produced more than 4,000 women graduates. In 1999, the Law School honored Cowan at Commencement ceremonies during a celebration of "100 Years of Women at UB Law"; she was cited as a role model for new law graduates entering the profession.

Hon. Mary Ann Killeen '52 worked in private practice with a large firm before winning a seat on the Buffalo City Court bench, then serving as an Erie County Family Court judge. "It wasn't easy," she recalls of her days in practice. "You get a little cynical when you are told by a partner in



Maryann
Saccomando
Freedman '58



Hon. Rose H.
Sconiers '61



Hon. Cynthia M.
Rufe '77



Denise E.
O'Donnell '82



Virginia Seitz '85



Sara Horowitz
'89

your law firm, quote, 'Over my dead body will there be a woman partner in this office.'"

Hon. Ann T. Mikoll '54 was the first woman appointed to the Appellate Division of the state Supreme Court. She retired as senior associate justice of that division in 1999. As an attorney, Mikoll served as corporation counsel for the City of Buffalo. She then spent 14 years as a Buffalo City Court judge, and was twice elected to the State Supreme Court, in 1971 and 1985. She also served on the Law School's Dean's Advisory Council.

Maryann Saccomando Freedman '58 was the first female president of the New York State Bar Association and the Erie County Bar Association. She is also a former director and president of the New York State Bar Foundation. She has served as an assistant state attorney general and as a matrimonial referee in state Supreme Court. Freedman, who has been widely active in public service, is of counsel with Cohen & Lombardo in Buffalo, where she maintains a general civil practice.

Hon. Jacqueline M. Koshian '59 stepped down from the state Supreme Court bench

in 2001, following 36 years of distinguished service. After working in a law partnership with her husband, Varkis Baligian, she went on to become the first female Niagara Falls City Court judge. The Law School awards an annual scholarship bearing the names of Koshian and her husband.

Hon. Rose H. Sconiers '61 serves on the New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Fourth Department, in Buffalo. Sconiers previously was a Buffalo City Court judge, executive attorney of the Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo, and assistant corporation counsel for the City of Buffalo. A past president of the SUNY Buffalo Law Alumni Association, she also has served on the Dean's Advisory Council.

Hon. M. Dolores Denman '65 stepped down as presiding justice of the state Supreme Court Appellate Division, Fourth Department, shortly before her death in 2000. She previously served as a Buffalo City Court judge for five years, after serving as a top prosecutor in the Erie County district attorney's office. "I have had great opportunities and I have loved every minute of it," she

once said. The Appellate Division courthouse in Rochester is named in her honor.

Hon. Cynthia M. Rufe '77 is a U.S. District Court judge for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. A Philadelphia native, Rufe joined the court in 2002 after being nominated by President George W. Bush. She began her legal career as a public defender and in private practice, before being elected to the Bucks County Court of Common Pleas, where she served for eight years.

A former president of the Law Alumni Association, **Hon. Barbara Howe '80** also serves as a member of the Law School's adjunct faculty. Her service on the bench includes Buffalo City Court and state Supreme Court, and in 2003 she became the first woman elected Erie County surrogate judge. She also retains close ties to UB's Department of Sociology, where she was teaching when she decided to enter law school.

Besides private practice, **Denise E. O'Donnell '82** has served in government positions at all levels. Currently she directs the Bureau of Justice Assistance, part of the federal Department of

Justice; the bureau helps local and state justice agencies with grant administration and criminal justice policy. Previously, O'Donnell held Cabinet roles in the administrations of two New York governors and served as an assistant U.S. attorney. She has long been active in the Law School.

Virginia Seitz '85, is an assistant attorney general who heads the Office of Legal Counsel in the Department of Justice. Previously she worked in the Washington, D.C., office of the law firm Sidley Austin LLP. Seitz is a former clerk for Judge Harry Edwards of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, and for U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan.

Sara Horowitz '89 is executive director of Working Today, an organization she founded in 1995 to meet the needs of freelance workers for benefits such as health insurance and retirement savings plans. Previously, she was a labor attorney in private practice and a union organizer with 1199, the National Health and Human Service Employees Union.

Some female firsts

- **First editor in chief of the Buffalo Law Review:** Josephine Y. King '65
- **First African-American Law School graduate:** Barbara Merriweather Sims '55
- **First Student Bar Association president:** Rosemary Gerasis Roberts '76
- **First tenured professor:** Marjorie Girth
- **First African-American professor:** Judith Scales-Trent
- **First winner of the Jaeckle Award:** M. Dolores Denman '65
- **First president of the Erie County Bar Association:** Maryann Saccomando Freedman '58
- **First federal court judge from the Law School:** Melanie L. Cyganowski '81
- **First U.S. Attorney:** Denise E. O'Donnell '82
- **First U.S. Supreme Court clerk from the Law School, and now first assistant attorney general:** Virginia A. Seitz '85
- **First woman appointed to the Appellate Division of the state Supreme Court:** Hon. Ann T. Mikoll '54



Hon. Barbara Howe '80
and Hon. M. Dolores
Denman '65